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TAGS: PHUM ELAB SMIG KTIIP BM TH
SUBJECT: BURMA: NATIONALITY VERIFICATION ON-GOING AT NORTHERN-MOST
BORDER

REF: A. REF A: BANGKOK 2821 (GOVERNMENT RESPONDS TO CRITICISM OF MIGRANT WORKER REGISTRATION PROGRAM, BUT PROBLEMS REMAIN)
B. REF B: CHIANG MAI 152
C. REF C: BANGKOK 1376

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Sensitive but unclassified; please handle accordingly.

Summary and Comment

1. (SBU) Thai Government and business contacts in Chiang Rai Province told us during an October 19-20 visit that the nationality verification process for Burmese workers is proceeding smoothly at the Mae Sai-Tachilek center, although at a slow pace. Problems they cited that are keeping the process from moving forward more efficiently include: workers' as yet unsubstantiated fears of retribution against their families in Burma as a result of their participation in the program; a lack of information about the registration process; complex documentary requirements; the Burmese Government's inability to process large numbers of applications simultaneously; and reluctance on the part of some employers to pay registration fees. Nonetheless, all but one participant successfully completed the process, receiving a passport and visa in about one day. While our contacts acknowledged the existence of unconfirmed rumors of corruption, they reported no confirmed cases of irregularities, and emphasized that all registered workers are pleased with their new status.

2. (SBU) Comment: Our contacts acknowledged unconfirmed rumors of corruption in the process, but emphasize that no workers registering in Tachilek have complained of irregularities. The situation at the Mae Sot-Myawaddy border crossing registration point may be different, they opined. We will visit Mae Sot, Tak Province in the near future, and will assess the implementation of the nationality verification program there. End Summary and Comment.

What's Going Right

3. (SBU) While the nationality verification program for Burmese is far from perfect, business and Thai Government contacts in Chiang Rai Province told us workers are generally pleased with the results, and that none of those who registered at the Chiang Rai-Tachilek border crossing point have reported fraud, corruption or other irregularities. As of October 20, 498 workers had attempted to complete the process, according to Ministry of Labor (MoL) officials based in Chiang Rai, with all but one having fully succeeded. The worker who was unsuccessful ran into trouble because he lied about his age and turned out to be under the minimum working age. The other 497 all have passports and visas already, according to the MoL, and are pleased with their new status.

4. (SBU) Burmese officials in Tachilek are processing about 50 applications per day, according to our contacts. In most cases, workers leave Thailand in the morning and return the same day, they told us, acknowledging that some have to spend the night in Burma to complete the process. One businessman reported that all workers who had successfully registered had used a broker. Another told us that workers residing in Chiang Rai could register without one, but that those coming from out of town need the services of an intermediary.

System Works, but It's Not Perfect

5. (SBU) Despite the high percentage of successful registrants, both business leaders and Thai Government contacts freely acknowledged stumbling blocks with the process, including:

-- fear on the part of workers that Burmese officials will use personal information obtained during the registration process to blackmail their families in Burma;

-- the fact that some migrant workers of Burmese origin do not have any legal status in Burma;

-- workers belonging to ethnic groups that actively resist the

regime militarily fear the regime will use personal information to retaliate against their families due to their political views;

-- some employers are reluctant to pay registration costs for their workers because once the workers complete the process, the employers believe they are free to accept jobs elsewhere in Thailand;

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-- because processing is slow, the February 28, 2010 deadline appears impossible to meet.

16. (SBU) According to the businessmen, neither the Thai nor the Burmese officials manning the processing centers are trained and equipped to carry out their duties effectively. Communication between officials on both sides is an obstacle, as is the burdensome amount of paperwork registrants have to fill out in Burma (some 10 pages of documentation, according to our contacts). Furthermore, our interlocutors alleged that Burmese officials in Tachilek often do not have the authority to make final determinations on applications, and therefore have to seek the advice of their superiors in Nay Pyi Taw. The lack of clarity about the process, particularly documentary requirements, has opened the way for intermediaries to play a role, according to business and government contacts. Fees charged varied anywhere from \$160 to \$285 for full service, according to our contacts, which includes the Burmese passport, Thai visa, medical examination, and Thai work permit.

17. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
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